

**LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION
TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE GRANT PROGRAM
SUMMIT MEETING
St. Louis, MO; June 20, 2002**

Introduction.

LSC convened this meeting to obtain feedback about the Technology Initiative Grant (TIG) program and about broader technology issues from a sample of program grantees and technology experts. In particular, LSC sought input about the program's effectiveness to date, how it could be improved, and how LSC could help field programs use emerging technologies to improve services to clients. A list of the meeting participants is provided in Appendix 1.

The meeting deliberations were wide-ranging and touched on a variety of topics. This report summarizes the discussions of major issues and profiles the actions LSC is taking to respond to participants' recommendations. The recommendations were offered throughout the meeting as well as during its concluding session.

Prior to the meeting, the facilitator interviewed participants to obtain their views about the issues they deemed most important. The interview results informed both the meeting design and follow-up activities.

An overriding theme highlighted at numerous points in the meeting was that legal services program leaders and staff must better appreciate that technology is a valuable tool for improving programs' effectiveness and efficiency in serving clients.

Program Mission and Priorities.

Some meeting participants lacked clarity about the TIG program's mission and priorities. LSC staff noted that the Congressional appropriations language governing the program fundamentally dictates grant awards. It specifies that, TIG funds shall "be used to improve pro se clinic methods and acquire computerized systems that make basic legal information and court forms accessible to pro se litigants."

Within this context, LSC's administration of the program is influenced by several strategic considerations. Most notably:

- Grants should help strengthen the capacities of state justice communities by developing different uses of emerging technologies and testing their effectiveness in improving services to client communities.
- LSC sees its role as a catalyst. TIG grants can enable grantees to spearhead initiatives that involve other community institutions in solving client problems. For example, program-led pro se initiatives can garner the support of the courts

- and the bar by removing backlogs that hinder courts' efficiency and attorneys' ability to practice law.
- The Corporation seeks to maximize resources by supporting projects with the potential to be readily and effectively duplicated in other settings.

Considerable discussion focused on the relative support provided innovative vs. infrastructure projects. Some maintained the emphasis on innovation was misguided when many programs did not have adequate baseline capacities. They observed that resource-poor programs lack the basic infrastructure and personnel necessary to develop and implement an innovative project. Without basic infrastructure support, programs cannot innovate and develop the requisite technology capacities. As a result, some argued, TIG's focus on innovative approaches widens the gap between the have and have-not programs.

Staff acknowledged that state justice communities with limited financial resources face particular challenges in developing adequate technological capacities, but noted that Congress did not mean for TIG funding to merely supplement basic field grants or replace a technology line item in basic field budgets. Staff emphasized, however, that funding could and has been provided to support the infrastructure required to develop and implement innovative initiatives. That many participants were unaware of this demonstrated the need for better communication about the program.

Communication and Information Sharing.

In the pre-meeting interviews and during the meeting participants emphasized that more extensive communication would increase TIG's impact and enhance LSC's ability to strengthen field programs' use of technology to improve client services. In particular, they called for more information about TIG projects and products, e.g., lessons learned, systems developed and refined.

Participants were interested in receiving several different types of information, including: summary information about the types of projects that had and had not been funded; the lessons learned from funded projects; potential funding sources; non-profit technical assistance resources; the kinds of technologies that were feasible at the statewide level; the kinds of technologies that support state planning; areas within state planning that lend themselves to technology solutions; and academic or other outside studies about pertinent issues (e.g., how to set up a website or community education effort).

Staff highlighted the major categories of grants that had been funded – pro se, intake, service delivery, case management systems, websites, and innovation-related infrastructure – and discussed promising examples of funded projects in each category.

Participants observed that LSC could facilitate better information sharing by providing incentives and/or by requiring grantees to submit brief information on a periodic basis (e.g., a paragraph monthly) in a standard format.

More in-depth information and better communication about the TIG program will enhance LSC's relations with Congress. Detailed information about the program's concrete accomplishments will strengthen the Corporation's funding requests generally and help ensure continued funding for TIG in particular.

The recommendations section provides more detail about the specific types of information requested and measures under consideration to compile and disseminate it.

Staff reported that LSTech (www.lstech.org) is already funded to help disseminate some types of information about TIG. It compiles and maintains a static, on-line library of funded projects. Programs can post and share updated information about project developments and results. Also, interested folks can sign up for the project's e-journal and other information. Steve Gray, LSTech's director, reported that TIG grantees and other legal services program staff have not taken full advantage of the project's services. He noted that although more publicity about LSTech's existence and services could increase this, a greater commitment by grantees to share information also is needed.

Roles and Activities of LSC Technology Staff.

Participants noted that many TIG grantees – as well as many other LSC-funded programs – need training and technical assistance to effectively use emerging technologies to improve their services to clients. Some emphasized that grantees often need targeted assistance and emotional support, not just general information in the form of “frequently asked questions.” Technical assistance provided by a real person who listened and responded to a specific problem was considered more effective and less intimidating than web-based FAQs and related T/A. Some noted that more T/A is needed in the TIG application process. They reported that because proposal writers often are not technology experts, projects have unrealistically low budget requests. Participants asked about the availability of LSC staff to provide assistance in these areas.

Staff said that they recognized and would like to meet these needs, but noted LSC lacked the resources to fully provide these services. The Congressional appropriation for TIG provided no funds for LSC's administrative costs, so program administration was financed through the Corporation's already stretched Management and Administration line. Administering TIG, which requires overseeing the grants, staying knowledgeable about new technology developments and applications, and working with other OPP staff to fulfill LSC's responsibilities, already overtaxes the OPP technology staff.

Given these realities, participants suggested that LSC could provide valuable assistance to grantees through work with **private vendors**. Activities might include providing “consumer reports” on the effectiveness of different products and services; establishing “product” standards; providing guidance to vendors (and grantees), such as when a vendor seeks to adapt a product for use in different states; and leveraging resources through bulk purchases of vendors' products and services for grantees.

Participants asserted that these would be appropriate LSC activities because grantees must obtain vendors' products and services. By increasing the demand for these products

and acting as a major purchaser (albeit indirectly) of these products, LSC has the authority and responsibility to mediate relationships between grantees and vendors.

There was agreement that LSC staff should not provide training on vendors' products since that could be construed as an endorsement of a particular vendor's products or services.

Evaluation.

During the meeting and the interviews participants emphasized that reliable evaluative information about TIG projects is critical. These data will not be forthcoming soon for several reasons. Funded programs have only been operating for one or two years of their (in many cases) three-year cycle. Most grantees lack the necessary in-house capacities to conduct effective program assessments. Further, they may be unaware of expertise in their communities that can perform these tasks, and/or lack the resources necessary to retain them.

LSC funded the Legal Aid Society of Cincinnati, which contracted with the Management and Information Exchange (MIE), to produce evaluation instruments and protocols for TIG grantees' use. MIE has not completed its work, and may not do so until late fall. This delay is caused by several factors, among them: the grant was not made until the second year grant cycle and the complexities and challenges of the task were underestimated. Participants urged LSC to do whatever it could to accelerate this process, maintaining it was imperative to get evaluations up and running as soon as possible.

LSC staff people noted they shared participants' interest in evaluative information. Not only is this information necessary for effective grantmaking and providing the field with critically needed information, it also is necessary to justify continued Congressional funding for the program.

Participants identified several issues that could affect the ultimate quality and utility of evaluative information. First, in most cases the evaluation is addressed at the end of the project. To be most effective, however, evaluation should be an integral component of project design, facilitating assessments at each project stage from the outset, not just at its end. This provides project managers with on-going information about the effectiveness of program strategies and operations, ensuring that key lessons are identified and documented and necessary changes implemented. Second, compared to many organizations, legal services programs have little experience with evaluations. This can intensify the tensions evaluations can produce, thereby limiting a program's capacity to see evaluations as a program improvement tool rather than a mechanism that will challenge its overall effectiveness and credibility. Finally, previous legal services assessment approaches sometimes have been too narrowly focused, contained too little critical analysis, and provided only limited qualitative and quantitative data.

The group discussed various suggestions to expedite the completion and enhance the quality of program evaluations. Some noted that universities could provide programs

with valuable evaluation assistance, often for free or at low cost. Faculty members have requirements (albeit weak) to conduct community services and can supervise (low wage) graduate students on evaluation projects. Bob Cohen reported that UC Irvine faculty used this model to conduct a well-respected study of the ICAN project that cost his program \$10,000. He also noted that the evaluation can be downloaded from the project website.

Federal agencies and the private bar also were seen as valuable resources in this area. The view was that these entities have produced evaluations of different systems that could inform legal services programs' initiatives and also have useful evaluation tools.

LSC staff reported that evaluations conducted by university staff or other experts not connected with legal services programs carry the most weight with Congressional members and staff.

Some said that grantees may not have budgeted adequately for their evaluations and asked if LSC might contract with a vendor(s) for the evaluations or broker a contract on programs' behalf. A related question was whether LSC could secure Congressional funding for an evaluative process and staff to support it.

LSC Vice President Youells noted that because of the experimental nature of many TIG projects, LSC expected some would fall short of their goals. She emphasized that this did not mean the projects were failures, however, because they would yield information about the efficacy of different uses of technology in improving client services. Some participants noted that while they agreed with this perspective, grantees typically were hesitant to divulge information about their shortcomings to funders. They stressed the importance of establishing an environment that did not penalize those who acknowledged and profiled the shortcomings of their projects.

Broad Impacts of the TIG Program.

Meeting participants identified several program accomplishments aside from the specific products and lessons resulting from individual projects. In particular, they said, the program has prompted legal services staff to think more about technology as a program improvement tool; helped generate new outside funding; provided further evidence that the community is becoming more innovative; improved our representation in the courts; strengthened state justice communities by providing incentives for different entities within states to collaborate in project planning and design; and, showed that technology is fundamentally about client service.

Planning for the Future.

In the meeting's next-to-last session Richard Zorza made a very informative presentation about factors and objectives that should guide planning to identify and employ the next generation(s) of emerging technologies to better serve clients.

LSC'S RESPONSE TO MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the meeting and during the closing session participants made a variety of recommendations to improve the TIG program. These fell into three broad categories: information compilation and dissemination, program structure and operations, and evaluation issues.

Information Compilation and Dissemination.

The Corporation will perform short- and longer-term follow-up initiatives to obtain and disseminate the types of information participants requested. To provide some information as expeditiously as possible, in early October LSC will publish ***an interim report on the TIG program***. This report will include information (including pertinent statistical data and graphics) about:

1. Program goals;
2. The types of projects that have been funded;
3. What's been learned from funded projects, questions that have yet to be answered, and when we expect they will be answered;
4. Where the program is going, including 2002 grant priorities, broadening or replicating proven approaches, and conducting evaluations;
5. A listing and descriptions of all funded projects; and,
6. The major reasons unsuccessful applications were not funded.

A longer-term goal is systematically obtaining and disseminating information that will strengthen the Corporation's planning and operational capacities and help grantees employ emerging technologies to most effectively serve clients. Staff are now exploring mechanisms that would:

1. Facilitate word searches of TIG grants;
2. Provide access to current information (updated quarterly) about specific project outcomes and lessons;
3. Provide information on the financial costs and operational challenges involved in implementing specific technology initiatives; and,
4. Provide information about funding sources and strategies used across the country.

Program Priorities, Structure and Operations

Most participant suggestions in this area involve TIG policies and/or broader LSC policies. These policies preclude some recommendations and delay follow-up action on others until the policy ramifications are fully considered.

The problems inherent in two major suggestions were discussed earlier in this report. They are targeting more TIG resources to basic technology (p.2) and providing more LSC staff to TIG program administration and TA and broader technology TA (pp.3-4).

Major suggestions under consideration include:

1. Implementing a two-stage application process, with letters of inquiry comprising the first stage.

2. Developing strategies to increase the portion of basic field grants devoted to appropriate technologies.
3. Using the state planning and competition processes to ensure TIG and other technology resources are effectively leveraged.
4. Requiring preliminary testing – before programs make major investments – to ensure specific technologies are feasible or that project design is appropriate.
5. LSC leveraging resources by providing vendor information, negotiating joint purchases, etc.

Evaluation

As indicated above (p.4), evaluation resources will be available for TIG grantees in November. Participants urged LSC to do what it could to expedite this process and to develop and enforce deadlines for when grantees needed to submit their evaluations. In the interim, and to supplement these more comprehensive evaluation activities, LSC will obtain preliminary evaluative information through grantees' existing reporting requirements.

Participants also suggested that LSC identify research about low-income people's ability and willingness to use the web, kiosks and other electronic systems. LSC will conduct a preliminary review of the available research.

For further information about this report, the TIG program, or LSC's technology initiatives, contact one of the following staff people in LSC's Office of Program Performance:

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